

Book Review

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Drew Dalton, *The Ethics of Resistance: Tyranny of the Absolute* (London, U.K.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 154.

To echo the sentiments of Len Lawlor in his 2006 review of John Russon's *Human Experience*, Drew Dalton's *The Ethics of Resistance: Tyranny of the Absolute* is a book that I wish I had written. This text is a rigorous, articulate, and exceptionally clear development of a unique and original ethical position. In brief, his position is this: evil, rather than a lack or privation, is instead the result of blind devotion to some absolute value, entity, or concept. Rather than dismiss the idea of an absolute altogether, Dalton argues for the existence of the absolute in the form of the Other (via Levinas) but that this absolute must be *resisted* (rather than embraced). This position is articulated by bringing a dizzying number of philosophers into dialogue: Immanuel Kant, Alain Badiou, Quentin Meillassoux, Emmanuel Levinas, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, F.W.J. Schelling, Søren Kierkegaard, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, J.S. Mill, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Heraclitus. It is for these reasons that I highly recommend *The Ethics of Resistance* to both novices and scholars interested in ethics, phenomenology, and contemporary French philosophy.

The main subject of Dalton's text is the problem of evil. For Dalton, the history of Western European ethics has treated evil as "a moral failure," privation, or lack (1). As such, evil has been "defined not as a moral force in its own right, but as the perversion, rejection, or negation of the moral force of the absolute" (1). That is, if we know the absolute good, then we cannot help but be good ourselves. On this view, evil is the result of the failure to know or follow this absolute good. Yet, this cannot be the case. How much evil has resulted from a fervent devotion to some seemingly absolute good? Thus, in an echo of Schopenhauer, Dalton argues that evil is rather a positive force, and the inevitable result of devotion to some absolute value, concept, or entity.

Dalton uses this view of evil to tie a massive array of phenomena together, such as the North Atlantic slave trade, the Armenian genocide, the Shoah, Srebrenica (2), Operation Iraqi Freedom (14), consumerism (56), the problem of Abraham (60), child soldiers, the Jonestown Massacre, the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, plantation owners, the "great white burden" (64),

Adolf Eichmann (65), neurosis and psychosis (85), tsarist pogroms, the two World Wars, the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Alt-Right, Men's Rights Movements, the election of Donald Trump, BREXIT, the rise of European white nationalism in the form of groups like UKIP or Vlaams Belang, and Silicon Valley utopianism (107). For Dalton,

What each of these instances of evil has in common is the same attempt to realize on earth the complete order of an absolute idea of infinite perfection (e.g. the ideal society, the perfect race, a totally secure homeland) – some idea of an absolutely perfect good which, by virtue of its status, is capable of demanding the complete sacrifice of not only the life of the obedient subject, but the life of others as well. (56)

That is, people often commit evil acts through an attachment to some idea that they take to be an absolute good – a good which, they think, requires sacrifice. It is in the name of this absolute (e.g. God or blood purity) that evil acts are committed. Thus, Dalton argues, evil is not the result of some moral lack or failure, but the result of blind devotion to some absolute.

In light of this, Dalton argues that absolutes must be resisted, and thus recasts ethics as a “constant and thoughtful resistance to the power of the absolute” (111). It might seem like Dalton would advocate for the dissolution of absolutes altogether, but he takes another route. Rather than arguing for an ethics in light of the death of God, Dalton argues that we are surrounded by a “proliferation of absolutes” within our contemporary society and that we must learn how to resist their allure (108). He argues that his formulation of ethics as a form of resistance serves to recast how philosophers understand the project of ethics as such, in the form of the following question: “How are we to deal with the panoply of competing absolutes present in contemporary discourse when each of them summons us with a demand calling for our complete and total allegiance?” (108). Thus, ethics is not the pursuit of the absolute, but resistance to it.

That Dalton makes this argument in a shorter text, and that he makes such traditionally difficult thinkers digestible (such as Badiou or Lacan) to people who might not be familiar with them, is remarkable. The text itself is structured excellently and meticulously researched. The first half of the book articulates the basic problem with contemporary ethics (and its understanding of evil) so as to ground the possibility of a new kind of ethical theory on the basis of the phenomenology of Levinas. The second half of the book outlines what an ethics of resistance might look like through an examination of the work of Lacan and Foucault. Let us now take a brief tour through Dalton's text, but broad and cartoon-like strokes that will in no sense do justice to the way in which he navigates the complexity of these thinkers and ideas.

The first chapter works to show a dilemma inherent within post-Kantian ethical systems. After Kant, for Dalton, “[t]here is no longer any *universally* shared God to whom we can turn for guidance, nor is there any obviously *actualizable* noumenal realm of ideas or forms from which we can deduce determinate action” (11). This results in a difficult choice: “either give up on ethical absolutes entirely by embracing some form of ethical relativism or nihilism... or... attempt to establish some new non-absolute ground for ethical acquiescence and judgment” (11). Ultimately, neither horn is productive. Liberalism and Nationalism represent, for Dalton, forms of ethical dogmatism and ethical relativism (respectively) that both end in evil (e.g. colonialism and the project of Western Liberalism). However, the second horn of the dilemma does not work either, which Dalton shows through a convincing critique of both Badiou and Meillassoux’s respective attempts to anchor ethics in a non-absolute ground. On the one hand, Badiou’s idea of fidelity to the event ends up in a form of fanaticism (as illustrated by the suicide bomber). On the other hand, Meillassoux’s theory devolves into a form of eschatology, in which “ethical action consists for him in nothing more than a *hope* for what he calls ‘a world to come’” which forecloses the actual possibility of justice in *this* world (24).

The second chapter argues for the possibility of a universal and actual absolute ground in the phenomenology of Levinas. The chapter begins with a deft and rigorous defense of phenomenology against the charge of correlationism as found in contemporary speculative philosophy. Dalton argues that this charge is not particularly new, but can be found within the work of Frege, and, as Dalton rightly shows, Husserl took Frege’s initial criticisms of psychologism seriously, and developed the phenomenological project as a critique of both psychologism and naturalism. This, however, is a set-up for Dalton to make use of Levinas, within whom Dalton locates the possibility for a universal and actual absolute ground for ethical judgment, i.e. the Other.

However, as Dalton argues in the third chapter, Levinas’ account is ultimately problematic and must be offset by Schelling’s insistence on the reversibility of good and evil. According to Dalton, Levinas’ Other has a kind of absolute power over us – a power “that cannot be *shirked* nor *evaded*” (47). The fear, for Dalton, is that “the power possessed by this absolute appears capable of captivating the subject completely, becoming a tyrant who threatens to destroy the very existence and freedom which it founds and justifies” (50). To make this case, Dalton turns to the work of Schelling, who recognized the “possibility that any attempt to achieve the good might actually result in evil” (53). Dalton writes that, for Schelling, “any action established in affirmation of the absolute... runs the risk of reverting into evil, however well-intentioned it may be” (54). Thus, through Schelling, Dalton concludes that while we must affirm the existence of a universal and actual

absolute ground in the Other, this absolute must not be embraced, but instead resisted.

Parts One and Two are divided by an interlude, in which Dalton illustrates the way in which the absolute can have a tyrannical effect. The first example is that of Kierkegaard's famous defense of Abraham, which Dalton rejects outright. For Dalton, Abraham is willing to commit evil because of a blind devotion to God. Similarly, he argues that the atrocities committed by Adolf Eichmann were the result of the latter's devotion to the absolutes of the Nazi party.

The fourth and fifth chapters outline an ethics of resistance in light of the analyses given in Part One of the text. In this regard, Dalton leans on the work of Lacan and Foucault to locate a two-part structure of resistance. Lacan provides "a model of demonic resistance which, while acknowledging the power of the absolute in the Other, refuses to affirm it as a good," in the form of a no-saying (88). Foucault, in turn, provides for us a way to understand how we can cultivate this resistance within ourselves through his late analyses of the care of the self. Here, Dalton analyses a number of techniques that Foucault gives in late lectures.

The book ends with the development of what Dalton calls "ab-archy," which he proposes as an alternative to political theories of anarchy. Rather than the dissolution of some *arche*, Dalton instead tells us that the aim of an ethics of resistance is to "carve a space of freedom away from (ab) the ethical bondage with which the absolute holds us" (119). An ethics of resistance is, ultimately, a "saying 'no' to the Other and learning to protect and care for the self such that we are not led by the neck of our subjectivity, jerked around via our shame and desire, and carried into the excess of nihilism or fanaticism from which springs practical political evil" (120).

Perhaps the only limitation of Dalton's text is that it lacks a clear theoretical definition of what he means by the "absolute." This is not a deal-breaker, since, given what he tells us, I think we can infer that the absolute is any kind of value, concept, or entity that is taken to hold supreme or absolute authority over us. But, because he does not theoretically define the term, two minor questions arise from his analysis. First, what is the status of an ethical imperative in the form of a negative? It is based on some absolute? For example, what are we to make of the statement that slavery is always wrong? I think it is at least conceivable to see this as a negative absolute. Or is this negative merely the inverse of some positive absolute that I am not acknowledging? In any case, am I to resist the imperative against slavery? What would a dogmatic attachment to this imperative look like, such that it must be resisted? This brings me to the second uncertainty, which like the first, arises from a lack of theoretical definition for the absolute. Dalton seems to claim that his ethics of resistance is the *only* way for us to overcome our current situation (120). Should this be resisted? What does a self-reflexive

ethics of resistance look like? Does it make sense to think about ethically resisting an ethics of resistance? These questions are not meant to be rhetorical, but instead point to ambiguities left open by the text that can be cleared up with a concise definition of the absolute.

In any case, I highly recommend *The Ethics of Resistance* to both novices and scholars interested in ethics, phenomenology, and contemporary French philosophy. It presents a genuinely original philosophical position through rigorous, clear, and meticulous analyses, that, I think, must be reckoned with.

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